Chinese Silk and the Silk Road

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It is common knowledge that silk was found in China as one of the finest fabrics for apparel; it has a luxurious look and feel that no other fabric can match. However, very few individuals are aware of its discovery date, location, or method. There are numerous traditions around the discovery of silk, some of them are romantic and intriguing.

Origin of Silk

According to legend, a father and his daughter once owned a magical horse that could not only fly through the air but also understand human speech. One day, the father left on business and did not return for a considerable amount of time. The daughter promised him she would marry him if the horse

could find her father. Her father finally returned with the horse, but he was stunned by his daughter's pledge. Unwilling to allow his daughter to wed a horse, he slaughtered the poor animal. Then a miracle occurred! The horse's hide propelled the girl away. They eventually landed on a tree, and as soon as the girl touched the tree, she transformed into a silkworm. She spits long, thin silks every day. The silks just conveyed her longing for him.

A less romantic but more plausible hypothesis is that ancient Chinese women discovered this exquisite silk by accident. When they were selecting fruits from the trees, they discovered a white fruit that was too tough to eat, so they boiled it in hot water, but it was still difficult to consume. They eventually lost patience and proceeded to beat them with large sticks. Thus, silks and silkworms were identified. The white, hard fruit is actually a cocoon!

Sericulture

Sericulture is the industry of growing silkworms and unraveling cocoons. It takes a silkworm, which is no larger than an ant, an average of 25-28 days to mature sufficiently to spin a cocoon. The women farmers would then transfer them one by one to piles of straw, where the silkworm will attach itself with its legs on the outside and begin spinning.

Unwinding the cocoons is the next phase, which is performed by reeling girls. The cocoons are heated to kill the pupae, but this must be done at the appropriate moment; otherwise, the pupae would transform into moths, which will render the cocoons unusable for reeling. To unwind the cocoons, place them in a basin filled with hot water, locate the loose end of the cocoon, and then twist and transport the cocoons to a tiny wheel. Finally, two employees measure them to a specific length, twist them to produce raw silk, which is then coloured and weaved into fabric.

An interesting statistic is that it takes 111 cocoons to make a man's tie and 630 cocoons to make a woman's garment. One cocoon may produce a silk thread that is approximately one kilometer long.

Silk Road

Since the discovery of silk, the Chinese have utilized it in novel ways to produce silk clothing. This type of clothing quickly gained popularity. At that time, China's technological advancement was rapid. Emperor Wu Di of the western Han Dynasty intended to expand international trade.

The construction of a road becomes a priority in order to trade silk. The ancient Silk Road was constructed at the expense of countless lives and valuables over the course of roughly 60 years of conflict. It began in Chang'an

(now Xi'an) and through Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. Many Asian and European nations were interconnected.

Along with many other Chinese technologies, silk from China was later exported to Europe.

Romans, particularly women, were obsessed with Chinese silk. Prior to that, Romans created clothing from linen, animal skin, and wool fabric. Now they have all become silk. Silk clothing was a sign of affluence and high social standing for them. One day, an Indian monk paid the Emperor a visit. This monk had lived in China for many years and knew how to cultivate silkworms. The Emperor promised the monk a huge sum, so he buried many cocoons in his walking stick and took them to Rome. The cultivation of silkworms spread thereafter.

It has been thousands of years since China first discovered silkworms. Silk is still, in some way, a premium material in modern times. Some nations are experimenting with methods to produce silk without silkworms. They will hopefully be successful. But regardless of the outcome, no one should forget that silk was, is, and always will be a magnificent treasure.